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No Abstract

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Although changes have taken place, today's classrooms are still too closed and homogenous to provide students with a global perspective. Distance learning technologies afford one way in which educators can offer students the opportunity to engage in multiregional, multinational, and multicultural collaboration on a global scale. This potential addresses Robert Selman's contention that educators need to devise ways for students to progress beyond their egocentric views of the world (as cited in Sugar and Bonk, 1995). Reil adds that electronic communities will provide students with a more global education and enable them to view complex issues with a more global perspective (as cited in Sugar and Bonk, 1995). The advantage of distance learning technologies, whether they be interactive television (ITV) or computer mediated communication (CMC), is that they enable students to create shared meanings around roles, ideas, objects, and perspectives.

Both ITV and CMC are becoming more common in educational settings, not only in colleges and universities, but in K-12 settings as well. Many institutions are realizing that distance learning technologies can allow students to connect to people, places, and events outside the four walls of a classroom, without the need to physically leave the classroom. ITV's power is that it allows students to make these connections live, face-to-face, and interactive. CMC technology enables students to learn and collaborate anytime, anywhere. These new opportunities for collaboration and student interactions engage students in a process of shared meanings, a necessary component of community and culture building. Teachers can now take advantage of these new technologies, and the worlds they open up to students, to change the way they teach and learn in today's classrooms.

Just as there are many challenges in a conventional learning environment, instruction that is mediated by technology faces many challenges that can impede the effectiveness of the learning intended during these mediated interactions. The barriers of distance and of the technology used to bridge that distance are often difficult to overcome. Kochery (1997) found that students learning over a distance often feel alone and separated from not only the teacher, but also from the socialization with other students. Interaction is a key ingredient to the social construction of meaning and information. Students must feel comfortable and willing to work with others to build on what they already know in order to create a new understanding of the world around them. Kochery (1997) went on to say that an important part of learning involves actively working and interacting with other students to construct knowledge. Without these interactions, student isolation can be a significant barrier to students' understanding of concepts and content and skill acquisition.

Studies have examined interaction and collaboration in conventional classroom environments. However, few studies or theories have addressed instruction mediated by ITV or CMC technologies to support student collaboration. This issue of collaboration in a technology-mediated environment is one worth investigation and analysis. Subsequently, there is much more that could be done to better our understanding of the mediated construction of communities, societies, or social worlds. Altheide (1994) pointed out that little attention has been given to how individuals communicate and engage in social activity in an electronically mediated environment and how this technology influences this interactivity. Work by Tinzman, Jones, Fennimore, Bakker, Fine, and Pierce (1990) suggests that collaborative groups of students learn better and solve problems better than students working individually and that communication and collaboration between students is essential for learning. However, these studies do not involve the use of electronic mediating technologies. Other than the work done by McLuhan and Fiore (1996), there are few researchers or theorists that have addressed mediation and developed theories pertaining to the interplay between the elements of mediation. We know that media has a profound impact on how the content is understood, and in a broader sense, how we all make sense of our own lives. Therefore, it is important that new questions be asked about this phenomenon in the context of electronically mediated environments and that research be conducted based on these new questions to better understand the phenomenon in question. There is a need to make sense of the student interactions that take place in mediated collaborative environments (Sugar and Bonk, 1995).

There are many questions that must be asked regarding student collaboration and electronic mediating technologies that have yet to be answered. According to Maines and Couch (1988), these new technologies are changing our sociological systems. McLuhan and Fiore (1996) continue to argue that the medium is the "massage." It is important for us to understand how and why this is happening and what the impact will be on us later in our students' lives. There is much to be learned about this new educational environment and the impact that technology might have on the mediation of communication and collaboration between students and teachers in today's classrooms.

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